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Regional Environmental Governance: Interdisciplinary Perspectives, Theoretical Issues,
Comparative Designs (REGov)

The imaginative geographies of climate wars

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Abstract

This contribution is based on a set of reflections presented at the REGov Workshop. These reflections were offered as part of a panel discussion around the topic “Regional security and the environment.” Additional presentations provided in the context of this panel discussion include those of Richard Matthew, University of California Irvine (this volume) and Saleem H. Ali, University of Vermont (this volume). Webcasts of all presentations are available at <http://www.reg-observatory.org/outputs.html>.
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Keywords: Climate change; Climate wars; Imaginary geographies; Narrative.

I.

Montesquieu writes in *De l'esprit des lois* (1748): “*Dans les climats chauds, [où règne ordinairement le despotisme], les passions se font plus tôt sentir,*” which we might roughly translate as “in the hot climate regions, [...] the passions come up much earlier.”

You might wonder why I start my reflections on *Regional security and the environment* with a statement by a French philosopher who has died long ago. Indeed, what I am going to suggest is that the main thrust of Montesquieu's statement written down more than 250 years ago, continues to be present in a number of current narratives, both political and academic, that link environmental change, in particular climate change, with security, or rather: insecurity, violence, anarchy, disorder and other such unwanted things.

Perhaps, the following statement made by UN General Secretary Ban Ki Moon provides a good entry-point to what I want to talk about today. Ban Ki Moon (2007) wrote and said that „the Darfur conflict began as an ecological crisis, arising at least in part from climate change.” Jeffrey Sachs, the influential writer of *The End of Poverty*, made the following comment: “Darfur, at its core, is a conflict of insufficient rainfall” (Sachs, 2005). Ban Ki Moon's and Jeffrey Sachs' statements are both representative of a growing and increasingly influential discourse about “climate wars”. In Germany, Harald Welzer's (2008) book on *Klimakriege* has been very influential as has been Gwynne

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Dyer's *Climate Wars* (2008) in North America. Finally, and more importantly, the German Advisory Council on Global Environmental Change (WGBU) published a policy report with the title *Climate as a security risk* (2008).

The basic thrust of this “climate wars” narrative is as follows: climate wars are the wars of the future: in an increasingly warmer world, resources are likely to become scarcer, in particular in the already dry and hot zones of the earth. Scarcity of resources triggers struggles for survival and therefore, future wars will be fought by desperate populations in their struggle to survive – if they have not yet migrated to Europe (the second influential narrative – that of climate-induced migration, which I will not discuss here).

In my reflections, I want to suggest that this climate wars narrative is flawed and dangerous. It is flawed, because it is based on a misleading interpretation of the scientific environmental conflicts literature. It is dangerous, because it produces a regionalization, which maps out the global South as hot spots (in a true sense) of violence and insecurity. This is what I will call the imaginative geographies of climate wars. Imaginative geographies, suggests Edward Said (1978) in *Orientalism*, are mapped out on the basis of a demarcation of a familiar space that is “ours” from one that is “theirs” – and involves a dramatization of this difference (and distance). Said lays out the cultural practices that produce Western knowledge about the Orient through what he called Orientalism. Similarly, we need to map out the political practices that produce “scientific” or “policy” knowledge(s) about those hot places where the passions come up more easily ... and that are likely to descend into violence, anarchy and self-destruction as soon as resources become scarcer.

II.

Let us first try to characterize the climate wars narrative in a stylized way. Rarely does this narrative employ a deterministic relationship between scarcity and violent conflict, but it uses statements such as “climate change enhances mechanisms that trigger violence and insecurity,” as in the 2008 report by the German Advisory Council on Global Change. Climate change is likely to degrade natural resource endowments in many tropical and sub-tropical regions and this is seen to enhance conflicts over resources, which are thought to become violent after a certain threshold of scarcity has been achieved and those conflicts degenerate into a hopeless struggle for survival. The famous American writer Robert Kaplan summarized this kind of thinking in his essay *The Coming Anarchy* (1994), where the sub-title maps out the programme: “How scarcity, crime, overpopulation, tribalism, and disease are rapidly destroying the social fabric of our planet.” Harald Welzer framed this problematic as ecocide (“Ökozid”), building on Jared Diamond’s argument in his influential *Collapse* (2007), where the latter traced past societal disintegration and collapse as a result of environmental degradation and escalating scarcity.

I wouldn’t be surprised if some readers had a feeling of déjà-vu. Indeed, these kinds of arguments have been very influential in the so-called environmental conflicts or environmental security literature of the 1990s, when Thomas Homer-Dixon published his influential work on *Environment, Scarcity and Violence* (1999). Homer-Dixon escaped a simple deterministic relationship between scarcity and violence through his adaptability / ingenuity concept, which suggests that societies could adapt to increasing scarcities through technological change, but many conflict-prone countries in the global South lacked the capacities for such adaptability. Similarly, the German Advisory Council on Global Environmental Change focuses on a variety of “conflict constellations,” where each of these different “constellations” is likely to have different security implications in various places that span the globe. Geography seems to matter in terms of how climate-induced change disrupts social cohesion in different places and “constellations.” Nevertheless, the Advisory Council concludes that such conflict constellations are likely to increase in numbers and intensity leading to a more fragile globe and more environmental conflicts were likely to emerge.

All these contributions share a common narrative that structural conditions that may trigger violent conflict are likely to increase due to the pressure induced by increasing environmental scarcity. Many of these contributions also share two other assumptions that Harald Welzer spells out, while in many other studies, these remain rather implicit: First, countries with low levels of wealth are more vulnerable to violent conflict (most civil wars are fought in

“backward” countries); and second, violence as a mechanism of social relations appears as always looming or simmering in the background, just waiting to find fertile grounds to erupt.

III.

Let us look at Darfur, one of the preferred paradigmatic examples for climate wars in the present to illustrate this point. I have chosen this example as it features prominently in Harald Welzer’s writings as well as in Ban-Ki Moon’s and Jeffrey Sachs’ quotations above. These phrases construct a connection between environmental degradation and incidences of violence in Darfur. Welzer, for example, locates the conflict causes in the Darfur case in a “clash of civilizations” between “Arab” pastoralists and “African” sedentary peasants. He suggests that after the dramatic 1984 droughts in the Sahel, these peasants enclosed their farmland excluding the pastoralists who were forced to migrate further to the south in search for pastures as a result of the moving desertification frontier. The pastoralists lost their pastures and had to fight their way through the enclosed lands of the peasants. It is not only a fight between pastoralists and sedentary farmers, but between “cultures,” or “civilizations” – Huntington (1993) looms in the background. But if this earnest struggle for access to scarce resources was triggering the violence pertinent in Darfur, it is difficult to explain why the “Arab” militias used a scorched earth campaign, looting and burning all local resources, even burning all tree resources in their way. If these militias were fighting for access to resources, it would make little sense to destroy those resources that they had just successfully conquered. Rather, what these observations suggest is that there are political reasons and political mechanisms at work here that have little to do with the desperate struggle for survival between two different people and their livelihoods.

Unfortunately, Welzer is not alone with his narrative. The German Advisory Council identifies a Sahel “conflict constellation” that looks pretty similar to the Darfur crisis: The council writes that climate change produces environmental stress and social crises that will further destabilize an already fragile societal equilibrium of weak states, civil wars and acute poverty.

IV.

In my view, the geographical imaginations of a Sahel “conflict constellation” need some qualification.

The political geographer M.D. Turner (2004) argues convincingly that while so-called farmer-herder conflicts fit well into the environmental security narrative that sees these conflicts as driven by scarcity, a more complex view on the genesis and dynamics of such conflicts indicates that these conflicts are embedded in a genealogy of social relations between these groups – that are mutually co-constitutive: herders use cultivated fields as pasture while the dung of their animals provides useful fertilizer for the fields. Of course, such relations of co-existence and multiple uses of natural resources are not conflict free; rather, conflicts have always been part of negotiating access and use of these resources. However, due to their long-standing relationships and the history of these relations, conflicts, even when they turned violent, followed specific rules of de-escalation that allowed negotiating solutions. Turner’s point is important for a variety of reasons: first, it discards the view of the “contact hypothesis” that scarcity drives different “civilizations” into contact and thus conflict. Herders and farmers have a long history of relations.

The time geography of violence also indicates that it is not primarily scarcity that drives violence, but strategic clan politics of territorial control. Research of some of my colleagues in Zurich and Ethiopia has shown that violence among Somali pastoralists rarely occurs during periods of acute scarcity, when pastoralist groups of neighboring clans tend to share whatever resources are left with their brethren. Fighting happens during the rainy season when resources are rich. Fighting and raiding takes place because different clans try to expand their territorial control. This research suggests (and there are many more studies confirming this): Violent conflict *per se* is not new in the Sahel, but the dynamics of these conflicts have changed in recent years due to changing geopolitical constellations, such as the proliferation of small arms and different geopolitical interests that foster the escalation of such conflicts (Hagmann & Mulugeta, 2008; Beyene 2009; Hundie 2008). Darfur is an excellent example to illustrate the geopolitics of environmental security as it underlines the political manipulation of environmental conflicts.

V.

Turner also makes a second point. He alerts us to the ethics of how we portray so-called environmental conflicts in the security literature, a point well worth noting.

In his book *Critical Political Ecology* (2003), Tim Forsyth talks about what he calls environmental orthodoxies. Forsyth writes: “Environmental orthodoxies are generalized statements referring to environmental degradation or causes of environmental change that are often accepted as fact, but have been shown by field research to be [...] inaccurate” (p. 38). These are commonly held narratives with a certain persistence that are based on flawed assumptions, models or causalities, but which nevertheless continue to influence policy. The environmental security narrative of “climate wars”, in my view, qualifies for such environmental orthodoxy, and it is a dangerous one, indeed. It is based on a selective reading of the literature, an insufficient analysis of the complexities and geographies of environmental conflicts. It entails a securitization drive that frames climate change as security threat.

This brings us to Turner’s point about ethics. Building on Said’s writings on imaginative geographies, Derek Gregory (1995) has suggested that we see imaginative geographies as something performative in the sense that “[they] produce the effects that [they] name.” What kind of imaginations are at play in the environmental security narrative of climate wars? It is the threat immanent in the Other, the place that is not Europe, not the US – it’s the dark continent (Africa), for example. This cartographic imagination of danger (Simon Dalby) locates the threat with the Other. It is a threat that the Other poses to us, it is the anti-enlightenment, the dark face of humanity. This geographical imagination has a long tradition. David Livingston (2001) has called this the “climatic imagination,” which we can trace back to such eminent thinkers as Immanuel Kant or David Hume – a tradition that views the tropical Other as deficient, as inferior. And this may remind us of Montesquieu’s words: “Dans les climats chauds [...] les passions se font plus tôt sentir [...].”

Reading through the climate wars narrative brings to light quite a few climatic imaginations – about the threat of migrating people from the African continent, of disintegrating societies that end in archaic killings and brute violence. These are imaginations of primitive mobility, primitive wars – wars that “we” in the West consider as uncivilized mass violence; I will not comment on the question whether the wars that the West fights out in various places is more civilized – it’s characterized by a more modern technology certainly.

But we should not give up hope. The Italian writer Claudia Magris, when receiving the *Friedenspreis des deutschen Buchhandels* – the German book publishers’ peace prize – said that we should not give in to scenarios that see war as inevitable. Against this seeming inevitability, he puts a *sperare contra spem* – to hope against all hope(lessness) (Magris, 2009). Indeed, when Derek Gregory wrote about the performativity of imaginative geographies, he also suggested that if such geographical imaginations are performed and space is a “doing”, there is also the creative possibility of performance, turning power against itself to produce alternative political modalities. And I think this is what academics can (and ought to) do. Create alternative geographies of climate change – at least on the representational level!

Ironically, Robert Kaplan, who was most fundamental in proclaiming *The Coming Anarchy*, recently wrote about “the revenge of geography”, implying a return of geodeterminism and geopolitical thinking. Yes, it is time for geography to take revenge. But a different kind of revenge that Kaplan (2009), who rather propagates a return of old geopolitics and geodeterminism, has in mind. We should put Kaplan’s “revenge” upside down and take revenge on a crude environmental determinism, by replacing it with a more subtle view on the multiple geographies of environmental change, their complexities and genealogies and the multiple trajectories of how different people live (together) in different places.

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